

TRANSCRIPT OF PRESIDENT REAGAN'S PRESS CONFERENCE

November 17, 1986

Good evening. I have a few words here before I take your questions, and some brief remarks. Eighteen months ago, as I said last Thursday, this administration began a secret initiative to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Our purposes were fourfold: to replace a relationship of total hostility with something better, to bring a negotiated end to the Iran-Iraq war and to bring an end to terrorism, and to effect the release of our hostages.

We knew this undertaking involved great risks, especially for our people and for the Iranian officials with whom we dealt. That's why the information was restricted to appropriate Cabinet officers and those officials with an absolute need to know.

This undertaking was a matter of considerable debate within administration circles. Our policy objectives were never in dispute; there were differences on how best to proceed. A principal issue in contention was whether we should make isolated and limited exceptions to our [Iran] arms embargo as a signal of our serious intent. Several top advisers opposed the sale of even a modest shipment of defensive weapons and spare parts to Iran. Others felt no progress could be made without this sale. I weighed their views. I considered the risk of failure and the rewards of success and I decided to proceed, and the responsibility for the decision and the operation is mine and mine alone. As Mr. Lincoln said of another presidential decision, "If it turns out right, the criticism will not matter; if it turns out wrong, 10 angels swearing I was right will make no difference."

I understand this decision is deeply controversial, and some profoundly disagree with what was done. Even some who support our secret initiative believe it was a mistake to send any weapons to Iran. I understand and I respect those views but I deeply believe in the correctness of my decision. I was convinced then, and I am convinced now, that while the risks were great, so too was the potential reward. Bringing Iran back into the community of responsible nations, ending its participation in political terror, bringing an end to that terrible war and bringing our hostages home—these are the causes that justify taking risks.

In foreign policy, the presence of risks alone cannot be reason enough not to act. There were risks when we liberated Grenada, when we went into Lebanon, when we aided the Philippines and when we acted against Libya, so we'll continue our efforts. However, to eliminate the widespread but mistaken perception that we have been exchanging arms for hostages, I have directed that no further sales of arms of any kind be sent to Iran. I have further directed that all information relating to our initiative be provided to the appropriate members of Congress. There may be some questions which, for reasons of national security or to protect the safety of the hostages, I will be unable to answer publicly. But again, all information will be provided to the appropriate members of Congress. And now I'll take your questions.

Administration's Credibility

In the recent past there was an administration whose byword was "Watch what we do, not what we say." How you would assess the credibility of your own administration in the light of the prolonged deception of Congress and the public in terms of your secret dealings with Iran, the disinformation, the trading of [Soviet physicist Gennadi] Zakharov for [American reporter Nicholas] Daniloff?

Let me take the last one first. I know some persist in saying that we traded Zakharov for Daniloff. We did not. We said that we would have no dealings with the Soviet Union, even on going to Iceland [for the summit], until Daniloff was in our hands.

But to bring it up to date on this, there was no deception intended by us. There was the knowledge that we were embarking on something that could be of great risk to the people we were talking to, great risk to our hostages. And therefore we had to have it limited to only the barest number of people that had to know. I was not breaking any law in doing that. It is provided for me to do that. At the same time, I have the right under the law to defer reporting to Congress—to the proper congressional committees—on an action, and defer it until such time as I believe it can safely be done with no risk to others.

And that's why I have ordered in this coming week the proper committees will be briefed on this. And we—there are still some parts of this that we cannot go public with because it will bring to risk, endanger people that are held and people that we have been negotiating with. We were not negotiating government to government, we were negotiating with certain individuals within that country.

You don't think your credibility has been damaged? And are you prepared now to disavow the finding, which lets you make end runs around the Iranian arms embargo? Are you going to tear it up?

No. As I say, I have—we are going to observe that embargo. And it's part of the same reason that, as I've said, we were doing this in the first place, and that is to see, among the other issues involved, if we can help bring about peace between those two countries [Iran and Iraq]—a peace without victory to either one or defeat, and that will recognize the territorial integrity of both. And this is something that all our allies are seeking also. But I think the people understand that sometimes you have to keep a secret in order to save human lives and to succeed in the mission, just as we went into Grenada without prior notice because then we would have put to risk all of those men who were going to hit the beach.

Shultz's Job Status

Has Secretary [of State George P.] Shultz discussed his resignation with you? Have you agreed to accept it, or have you asked him to stay on?

He has never suggested to me in our meetings that—resignation, and in fact, he has made it plain that he will stay as long as I want him and I want him. So there's never been any discussion there. He knows that I want him to stay, and he has in advance said that he wants to. There's been no talk of resignation.

Has he made his staying conditioned on your agreeing not to send further arms to Iran?

No, there have been no conditions. As I say, we didn't discuss that. And, as I've said now, there is no need to go further with this. We—the mission was served that made us waive temporarily that for that really minuscule amount of spare parts and defensive weapons.

You have stated flatly, and you stated flatly again tonight, that you did not trade weapons for hostages, and yet the records show that every time an American hostage was released—last September, this July and again, just this very month—there had been a major shipment of arms just before that. Are we all to believe that was just a coincidence?

The only thing I know about major shipments of arms—as I've said, everything that we sold them could be put in one cargo plane and there would be plenty of room left over. Now, if there were major shipments—and we know this has been going on—there have been other countries that have been dealing in arms with Iran. There have been also private merchants of such things that have been doing the same thing. Now, I've seen the stories about a Danish tramp steamer and a Danish sailors' union officials talking about their ships taking various supplies to Iran. I didn't know anything about that until I saw the press on it, because we certainly never had any contact with anything of the kind. And so there's—it's just that we did something for a particular mission, and there was a risk entailed, and Iran held no hostages. Iran did not kidnap anyone, to our knowledge, and the fact that part of the operation was that we knew, however, that the kidnapers of our hostages did have some kind of relationship in which Iran could, at times, influence them—not always—but could influence them. And so three of our hostages came home.

If I may follow up on that first point: your own chief of staff, Mr. [Donald T.] Regan, has said that the U.S. condoned Israeli shipments of arms to Iran, and aren't you, in effect, sending the very message you always said you didn't want to send? Aren't you saying to terrorists: Either you or your state sponsor—which in this case was Iran—can gain from the holding of hostages?

No, because I don't see where the kidnapers or the hostage-holders gained anything. They didn't get anything. They let the hostages go. Now, whatever is the pressure that brought that about, I'm just grateful to it, and for the fact that we got them. As a matter of fact, if there had not been so much publicity, we would have had two more that we were expecting.

When you had the arms embargo on, you were asking other nations, our allies particularly, to observe it publicly. But at the same time, privately, you concede you were authorizing a breaking of that embargo by the United States. How can you justify this duplicity?

I don't think it was duplicity. And as I say, the so-called violation did not in any way alter the balance, military balance, between the two countries. But what we were aiming for, I think, made it worthwhile, and this was a waiver of our own embargo. The embargo still stays now and for the future. But the causes that I outlined here in my opening statement—first of all, to try and establish a relationship with a country that is of great strategic importance to the peace and everything else in the Middle East; at the same time, also to strike a blow against terrorism, and then to get our hostages back, as we did, and to—this particular thing, was, we thought, necessary in order to make the contacts that we made and that could lead to better relations with us. And there was a fourth item also, as I've pointed out.

Disbelief of the Public

The polls show that a lot of American people just simply don't believe you. But the one thing that you've had going for you more than anything else in your presidency, your credibility, has been severely damaged. Can you repair it? What does it mean for the rest of your presidency?

Well, I imagine I'm the only one around who wants to repair it, and I didn't have anything to do with damaging it.

You say that the equipment which was shipped didn't alter the military balance. Yet, several things—we understand that there were 1,000 TOW antitank missiles shipped by the U.S. The U.S. apparently condoned shipments by Israel and other nations of other quantities of arms as an ancillary part of this deal—not directly connected—but had to condone it or the shipments could not have gone forward. So how can you say that it cannot alter the military balance, and how can you say that it didn't break the law when the National Security Act [amendments] of 1977 plainly talks about timely notification of Congress, and also stipulates that if the national security requires secrecy, the president is still required to advise the leadership and the chairmen of the intelligence committees.

Everything you've said here is based on a supposition that is false. We did not condone, and do not condone, the shipment of arms from other countries. [The White House issued this statement by the president after his news conference: There may be some misunderstanding of one of my answers tonight. There was a third country involved in our secret project with Iran. But taking this into account, all of the shipments of the token amounts of defensive arms and parts that I have authorized or condoned taken in total could be placed aboard a single cargo aircraft. This includes all shipments by the United States or any third country. Any other shipments by third countries were not authorized by the U.S. government.]

And what was the other point that you made here?

Other Arms Shipments to Iran

The antitank missiles, sir.

Oh, no, about the—no, that it didn't—no, that it didn't violate the—or that did violate the law. No, as I've said, the president, believe it or not, does have the power, if in his belief national security can be served, to waive the provisions of that law as well as to defer the notification of the Congress on this.

Isn't it possible that the Iraqis might think that a thousand antitank missiles was enough to alter the balance of that war?

These are, this is a purely defensive weapon. It is a shoulder-carried weapon and we don't think that, in this defensive thing, we didn't add to any offensive power on the part of Iran. We know that Iraq has already announced that they would be willing to settle the conflict, as we've said, with no winners or losers. And that, and the other parts happen to be spare parts for an anti-aircraft Hawk battery. And, as I say, all of those weapons could be very easily carried in one mission.

Israeli Role in Arming Iran

I don't think it's still clear just what Israel's role was in this—the questions that have been asked about a condoned shipment. We do understand that the Israelis sent a shipment in 1985, and there are also reports that it was the Israelis that contacted your administration and suggested that you make contact with Iran. Could you explain what the Israeli role was here?

No, because we, as I say, have had nothing to do with other countries or their shipment of arms or doing what they're doing. And no, as a matter of fact, the first ideas about the need to restore relations between Iran and the United States or the Western world, for that matter, actually began before our administration was here. But from the very first, if you look down the road at what could happen and perhaps a change of government there—that it was absolutely vital for the Western world and to the hopes for peace in the Middle East and all, for us to be trying to establish this relationship. And we worked to—we started about 18 months ago, really, as we began to find out some individuals that might be possible for us to deal with and who also were looking at the probability of a further accident.

The contacts that you're suggesting are with moderates in the Iranian government and in the Iranian system. Barry Goldwater tonight said that in his judgment there are no moderates in Iran. I don't mean to suggest that there may not be, but how did you know that you were reaching the moderates, and how do you define a moderate in that kind of a government?

Well, again you're asking questions that I cannot get into, with regard to the answers. But believe me, we had information that led us to believe that there are factions within Iran, and many of them with an eye toward the fact that they think sooner, rather than later, there is going to be a change in the government there. And there is great dissatisfaction among the people in Iran.

Going back over your answers tonight about the arms shipments and the numbers of them, are you telling us tonight that the only shipments with which we were involved were the one or two that followed your Jan. 17 finding, and that whatever your aides have said on background or on the record, there are no other shipments which the U.S. condoned?

That's right. I'm saying nothing but the missiles that we sold—and remember, there are too many people that are saying "gave." They [the Iranians] bought them.

We've been told by the chief of staff, Donald Regan, that we condoned, this government condoned an Israeli shipment in September of 1985, shortly before the release of hostage Benjamin Weir. That was four months before your intelligence finding on Jan. 17 that you say gave you the legal authority not to notify Congress. Can you clear that up, why this government was not in violation of its arms embargo and of the notification to Congress for having condoned American-made weapons [being] shipped to Iran in September of 1985?

No, that's—I never heard Mr. Regan say that, and I'll ask him about that because we believe in the embargo and, as I say, we waived it for a specific purpose—in fact, with four goals in mind.

What is unclear to, I think, many people in the American public is why, if you are saying tonight that there will be no further arms shipments to Iran, why you won't cancel the Jan. 17 intelligence finding so that you can put to rest any suggestion that you might, again, without notification and in complete secrecy and perhaps with the objection of some of your Cabinet members, continue to shift weapons if you think that it is necessary?

No. This—I have no intention of doing that, but at the same time we are hopeful that we're going to be able to continue our meetings with these people, these individuals.

But you won't cancel the intelligence finding?

I don't know whether it's called for or whether I have to wait until we've reported to Congress and all. I don't know just what the technicality legally is on that.

Why do you think, its strategic position notwithstanding, the American people would ever support weapons to the Ayatollah [Ruhollah] Khomeini?

Well, we weren't giving them to the Ayatollah Khomeini. The—it's a strange situation. As I say, we were dealing with individuals, and we believe that those—and some of those individuals are in government, in positions in government. But it was not a meeting officially of the United States head of state and the Iranian head of state. But these people, we believed, and their closeness to the Iran military was such that this was necessary to let them know, number one, that we were serious and sincere in our effort about good relations, and also that they were dealing with the head of government over here—that this wasn't something coming out of some agency or bureau, that I was behind it.

If that's the case, some have asked that if Libya occupied as strategic a position as Iran did, would you then arm [Moammar] Gadhafi and bomb Khomeini?

I know that's a—believe me, that's about as hypothetical a question as anyone could imagine. The situations are quite different.

Perceptions of a Swap

You've said that you were not swapping—or you did not think you were swapping—arms for hostages, but did it ever occur to you or did it never occur to you that certainly the Iranians would see it that way and that they might take it as an inducement to take more hostages, especially in light of the fact that they've released three but taken three more?

No. To the best of our knowledge, Iran does not own or have authority over the Hezbollah [in Lebanon]; they cannot order them to do something. It is apparent that they evidently have either some persuasion, and they don't always succeed, but they can sometimes persuade or pressure the Hezbollah into doing what they did in this instance. And as I said, the Iranian government had no hostages, and they bought a shipment from us and we, in turn—I might as well tell you that we, in turn, had said when they wanted to kind of know our position and whether we were trustworthy in all of this, we told them that we were, we did not want to do business with any nation that openly backed terrorism. And they gave us information that they did not, and they said also that they had some evidence that there had been a lessening of this on the part of Khomeini and the government, and that they had made some progress. As a matter of fact, some individuals associated with terrorist acts had been put in prison there. And so that was when we said: Well, there's a very easy way for you to verify that, if that's the way you feel, and they're being held hostage in Lebanon.

If your arms shipments had no effect on the release of the hostages, then how do you explain the release of the hostages at the same time that the shipments were coming in?

I said that at the time—I said to them that there was something they could do to show their sincerity. And if they really meant it that they were not in favor of backing terrorists, they could begin by releasing our hostages. And, as a matter of fact, I believe and have reason to believe that we would have had all five of them by this last weekend had it not been for the attendant confusion that arose here in the reporting—

On that point—

You don't have your red mittens on.

You said earlier, and you said just now again, that but for the publicity, two other hostages would have been returned home by now. As you know, the publicity began in a Syrian, pro-Syrian magazine in Lebanon. My question is, therefore, are you suggesting that someone who is a party to this sabotaged it by deliberately leaking that original report?

To our best information, the leak came from a person in government in Iran and not one of the people that we were dealing with—someone that would be more hostile to us—and that individual gave the story to the magazine and the magazine then printed the story there in Beirut.

Shaking Up the NSC

There is a mood in Washington tonight of a president who is very much beleaguered, very much on the defensive. Why don't you seize the offensive by giving your secretary of state a vote of confidence, declaring that all future covert activities will have his support, and by shaking up the National Security Council in such a way as to satisfy the concerns in Congress that [it] has been running a paramilitary operation out of the basement of the White House in defiance of the State Department and the Congress?

The State Department and the secretary of state was involved, the director of the CIA was involved in what we were doing. And as I said before, there are certain laws in which, for certain actions, I would not have been able to keep them as secret as they were. But these people you've mentioned have been involved, do know what was going on. And I don't see that the action that you've suggested is called for.

But what you've disappointed me the most in is suggesting that I sound defensive up here. I've just been trying to answer all your questions as well as I can. And I don't feel that I have anything to defend about at all. With the circumstances the way they were, the decision I made I still believe was the correct decision, and I believe that we achieved some portion of our goals.

Do you believe that any of the additional hostages will be released?

I have to believe that.

During any of these discussions with your administration, was there ever any hint or suggestion that these weapons might be used to topple the ayatollah?

No, and I don't see in any way how that could be, with the particular things that we were using. I don't see where the ayatollah could be a logical target for an anti-aircraft missile, or even for a TOW missile, for that matter.

You made an exception to the arms embargo when you thought it was in the U.S. interest to do so. Why shouldn't other nations ship weapons to Iran when they think it's in their interests?

Well, I would like to see the indication as to how it could be in their interest. I know that there are other nations that feel as we do that the Western world should be trying to find an avenue to get Iran back where it once was, and that is in the family of democratic nations that want peace in the Middle East and so forth.

How does shipping weapons to Iran help bring them back into the community of nations? You've acknowledged that you were dealing with only a small portion of the government.

I was talking of strengthening a particular group who needed the prestige that that could give them—who needed that, well, that bargaining power themselves within their own ranks.

I believe you may have been slightly in error in describing a TOW as a shoulder-mounted weapon. It's a ground-to-ground weapon. Redeye is the shoulder weapon. But that's beside the point. TOWs are used to destroy tanks.

Yes, I know I know it's a tank weapon.
I don't think it's fired from your shoulder.

Well now, I have—if I have been misinformed, then I will yield on that. But it was my understanding that that is a man-carried weapon, and we have a number of other shoulder-borne weapons.

I did have a question, though. [Laughter]

You mean that wasn't a question? [More laughter]

No, sir, I thought I knew what a TOW was. I just wanted to ask you, what would be wrong at this stage of the game, since everything seems to have gone wrong that could possibly go wrong, like the Murphy Law, the Reagan Law, the O'Leary Law, this week—what would be wrong in saying that a mistake was made on a very high-risk gamble and that—so that you can get on with the next two years?

Because I don't think a mistake was made. It was a high-risk gamble, and it was a gamble that, as I've said, I believe the circumstances warranted. And I don't see that it has been a fiasco or a great failure of any kind. We still have those contacts. We still have made some ground. We got our hostages back—three of them—and so I think that what we did was fight, and we're going to continue on this path.